Swifts *Apus* sp. and Common House Martins *Delichon urbicum* on St. Helena, South Atlantic, in 2012–13

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Martinets *Apus* sp. et Hirondelles de fenêtre *Delichon urbicum* sur l'île de Sainte-Hélène, Atlantique Sud. Quatre mentions de martinets non-identifiés *Apus* sp. sur Sainte-Hélène en 2012–13 sont présentées, ainsi qu'une observation de 2–3 Hirondelles de fenêtre *Delichon urbicum*. Toutes les observations ont été réalisées pendant l'été austral, en novembre–janvier. Il s'agit des premières données confirmées de ces espèces pour l'île.

St. Helena lies in the South Atlantic between Africa and South America, at the same latitude as the Angola–Namibia border (15°57'54.95"S 05°42'27.72"W; Fig. 1). It does not lie on any known landbird migration route and there are no regular movements of landbirds to and from the island. Vagrant landbirds are rare due to the distances from any mainland or other large islands.

There are few records of 'swallow-like' birds, which have rarely been specifically identified, due to the sightings being brief and observers often lacking in experience and knowledge. Past records for the island are summarised by Rowlands *et al.* (1998). There are mentions of 'swifts', but no confirmed records. Haydock (1954) was informed about flocks of small, fast-flying, black birds appearing over Jamestown in October or November, but never staying for more than one day at a time. Memorable influxes were noted in 1941, 1945 and 1948. Haydock recorded 'swifts' on 8 October 1952–6 January 1953, which were presumed to be Common Swifts *Apus apus*. There are also a few mentions of 'swallows', even to species level as 'European Swallow' *Hirundo rustica*, from 1845, 1871, 1957 and 1980.

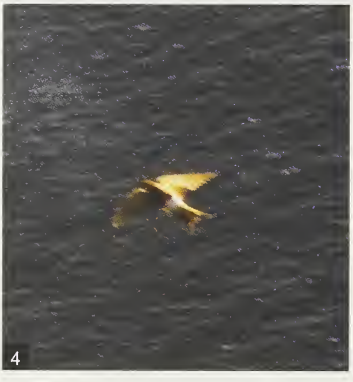
In 2012–13, swifts and hirundines were noted both years in the Southern Hemisphere's midsummer, in November–January. In one case, species-level identification supported by photographs was possible, aided by the discovery

Figure 1. St. Helena Island showing localities mentioned in the text (inset: St. Helena Island in relation to Africa and South America—Wikimedia Commons)

L'île de Sainte-Hélène avec les localités mentionnées dans le texte (encart: Sainte-Hélène par rapport à l'Afrique et l'Amérique du Sud—Wikimedia Commons)

Figures 2–3. Swift / martinet *Apus* sp., Man and Horse, St. Helena, 29 January 2012 (Chris & Sheila Hillman)

Figures 4–6. Common House Martin / Hirondelle de fenêtre *Delichon urbicum*, Munden's Cliffs, St. Helena, 19–20 November 2013 (David Higgins)



of a corpse, but in the others the species could not be determined, despite photographs being available.

1. Swifts *Apus* sp. at Man and Horse, January 2012

On 29 January 2012, around midday, two large swifts were observed for at least 20 minutes in the Man and Horse area, over the West Point Signal Station ruins (15°59'36.728"S 05°46'50.159"W) by JCH & SMH (Figs. 2–3). The birds were hawking for insects 2–15 m above the grasslands. They were all dark, ashy black, the primaries appearing paler, possibly due to the light as they were mainly seen against the sky on a bright sunny day. The wings were long, narrow and sickle-shaped—typical for a swift. Wingspan was estimated at *c.*30 cm. The tail had a shallow fork when spread. The birds did not call, the only sounds being that made by their wings as they flew close to the observers.

The photographs were sent to experts in South Africa and the UK. Positive identification proved impossible. Common Swift *Apus apus* or African Black Swift *A. barbatus* are both possible. *A. apus* is considered to be the most likely, given the large numbers that move between Europe and southern Africa, and the species occurs in many mainland African countries en route between the two on migration. *A. barbatus* undertakes some local movements, but breeds in the Southern Hemisphere summer.

Figure 7. Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum* carcass, Munden's Cliffs, St. Helena, 5 December 2013 (Phil Lambdon)

Hirondelle de fenêtre *Delichon urbicum* morte, Munden's Cliffs, Sainte-Hélène, 5 décembre 2013 (Phil Lambdon)

2. Swift *Apus* sp. at Man and Horse, November 2012

A swift was briefly seen under very misty and wet conditions by JCH & SMH on 23 November 2012 at *c.*07.30 hrs. No photographs could be taken. One was briefly seen again on 29 November at the same location in the early morning by GE. All three observers were agreed that the bird appeared paler below. JCH & SMH felt that the jizz was different from the two seen ten months previously.

3. Swift *Apus* sp. at South West Point, December 2013

A swift was observed at South West Point near the Signal Station on 19 December 2013 at 14.30 hrs by KG and A. Bennett. The bird appeared paler below, but not white, flying very fast, diving from on high, then flying closer to the ground and soaring upwards again. No photographs were obtained.

4. Common House Martins *Delichon urbicum* at Munden's Cliffs, November 2013

Two, possibly three, Common House Martins *Delichon urbicum* were photographed by DH, hawking for insects over the sea and Munden's Cliffs on 19, 20 and 22 November 2013 at 16.30–18.00 hrs (Figs. 4–6). The birds flew in a loop between Jamestown and Rupert's Valley via Munden's Battery, covering *c.*1 km on a full pass, with shorter flights in between. Rapid changes in direction were highly suggestive of foraging behaviour. Weather conditions were good, with few clouds and light winds.

On 5 December 2013, a dead Common House Martin, presumably one of the same birds, was found by PL below the cliffs at the same location (15°55'00.515"S 05°43'00.004"W; Fig. 7). From the extensive buff fringes to the flight and rump feathers, it was presumed to be a first-year bird. The corpse was not particularly emaciated and a minor abrasion on one side of the head suggested that it had died in a collision.

Discussion

It is of interest to note that the House Martins were in the same location (Jamestown) as the 'flocks of small, fast flying, black birds that appeared over Jamestown in October or November' in 1941, 1945 and 1948 (Haydock 1954). The capital Jamestown has a constant human presence and additional occurrences in all likelihood would have been noted. The Man and Horse location was probably little visited in the same period, being distant from Jamestown. Periodic appearances of swifts at that site for very short periods might well have been overlooked in the past. Rowlands *et al.* (1998) suggest that the 'small black swallow' (Melliss 1870) seen about the cliffs at Ladder Hill, above Jamestown, may have been a case of mistaken identity—possibly a storm-petrel.

It is presumed that vagrants reach the island either from the coast of mainland Africa, or possibly from Ascension Island to the north, having been deflected from their intended route by adverse weather. Ascension has records of Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, Common Swift and Common House Martin as vagrants (Ascension Government Heritage 2015). St. Helena lies in the path of the constant south-east trade winds, which could deflect northbound migrants out to sea, or prevent southbound birds already blown out to sea from reaching the African continent. There have been an increasing number of sightings of vagrant bird species over the years, none of which has appeared on the island regularly. All of the records have been in the Southern Hemisphere summer, in November–January. Most have been Eurasian or African species, but at least two could have been

from the Americas (St Helena National Trust photographic records of American Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica* and Comb Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos*). Previous historical records are from October–February, together with two 'swallow' records in June and July (Melliss 1875, Wahlberg in Craig & Hummel 1993).

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